# The Creation Ordinance of Labor

***Abstract:*** *This study examines the biblical doctrine of labor as a creation ordinance established by God for humanity's good. Beginning with the Genesis account, we trace the origins of labor as God's gracious gift to mankind, consider the impact of the fall upon human work, and explore the progressive development of industry throughout Scripture. The relationship between godliness and labor is examined through biblical teaching on idleness, industriousness, and proper motivation for work. Special attention is given to the connection between labor and Sabbath rest, as well as the biblical perspective on wealth resulting from diligent work. Throughout, Scripture consistently presents labor not as a burden but as a noble calling through which believers honor God, provide for their own needs and those of others, and reflect something of the divine image in which they were created.*

We continue our study of the doctrine of man to examine God's care for humanity, as seen in the blessings of the creation ordinance of labor. We live in a society and culture where labor is often viewed with disdain and contempt. How common it is for all of us to hear constant bemoaning of the drudgery of going to work, the complaint that "I hate Mondays." Perhaps we are guilty ourselves.

How contrary to God's Holy Word, where work, industry, and labor are not only held in high esteem by the biblical writers but are also considered consistent with biblical holiness and pleasing to the Lord Jesus Christ. Today, we want to examine this important fundamental activity that God's Word speaks of so often. This broad subject extends across the Old and New Testaments. The subject has been organized into three basic areas: the origins of labor, godliness and labor, and wealth and labor. As with all the creation ordinances, we can barely scratch the surface in covering this expansive topic.

## Origins of Labor

*Labor as God's Good Gift.* In the Genesis creation account, Adam was tasked with ruling over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living creature that moves on the ground. God also charged him with working in the Garden of Eden and caring for it. Genesis 2:15 states, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

We have no indication that this labor was unwanted or unappealing. On the contrary, everything God had previously made and commanded was very good. If we consider where Adam was, namely in paradise, we must conclude that the task of labor was to maintain this perfect situation rather than diminish it. In other words, the first charge of labor in the Bible was not a burden but a privilege.

Labor was also the model or pattern that God had just established in creation. Man, made in God's image, would be expected to follow that pattern. God worked for six days to create the heavens, the earth, and man. Genesis 2:2 records, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work."

From the very beginning, based on God as the example and on the environment in which man lived, labor would have been understood as God's good gift to man, teaching the creature that being active and busy fulfilling the commands of God was good. John Calvin's commentary on Genesis 2:15 regarding this good task is helpful. He writes, "Moses now adds that the earth was given to man, with this condition, that he should occupy himself in its cultivation. So it follows that men were created to employ themselves in some work and not to lie down in inactivity and idleness. This labor was pleasant and full of delight, entirely exempt from all trouble and weariness; since God ordained that man should be exercised in the culture of the ground, he condemned, in his person, all idleness. Therefore, nothing is more contrary to the order of nature than to consume life in eating, drinking, and sleeping, while in the meantime, we propose nothing to ourselves to do."

Labor has been truly God's good gift from the beginning of creation. It was commanded by the Creator and executed by the creature man, motivated by loving obedience to his God.

*The Impact of the Fall of Man.* The first reference to labor after creation appears in God's words to man immediately after Adam and Eve's disobedience. Genesis 3:17–19 records, "To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, You must not eat of it, Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'"

The devastation that the entrance of sin brought to this world, and its all-encompassing nature, must never be underestimated. This is true of all aspects of life and of the creation ordinances. Romans 5:12 clarifies the extent of sin: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way, death came to all men because all sinned."

What is particularly noteworthy about labor and its impact on the fall of man is that God's curse is not on labor itself but on the ground, resulting in the hardship and difficulty that man would experience in his labor. Genesis 5:28 and 29 record the words of Noah's father upon Noah's birth: "When Lamech had lived 182 years, he had a son. He named him Noah and said, He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed."

The disobedience of the first man and the first woman had a devastating effect on labor. What was first given to man as a noble task was still noble, but now the fruit of labor would come much harder.

*Progress in Labor and Industry.* Tracing the progress of labor and industry from the origins of man through the growth of nations and cultures in the Old Testament is an interesting study. The

Word of God reveals very early on the importance of the labor ordinance in the lives of the sons of Adam and Eve. Genesis 4:2b states, “Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil.”

After Cain murdered Abel, Scripture tells us that he built the city of Enoch. Genesis 4:17 records, “Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.” We also learn in Genesis 4 that Cain’s descendants became farmers, musicians, and metalworkers. Genesis 4:20–22 states, “Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all who played the harp and flute. Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron. Tubal-Cain’s sister was Naamah.”

In Genesis 6, Noah is skilled and resourceful enough to build an ark according to God’s specifications. In Genesis 11, Noah’s descendants, though acting in sin, built a city with a tower in the land of Shinar. Genesis 11:2–4 records, “As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly. They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

By Abraham’s time, two major civilizations, Babylon and Egypt, existed, along with numerous cities. All this industry and progress were due to man’s inherent, God-given ability to work. Obedience to God was not always easy, but man was created with a law in his heart that instructed him on the importance of the creation ordinance of labor.

## Godliness and Labor

The Word of God is full of examples that either commend man for his labor or condemn him for his lack of labor. What is abundantly clear in Scripture is that labor is consistent with a godly, Christ-honoring life. What is also abundantly clear is that idleness and laziness are completely contrary to God’s image in man and to God’s will for man.

*The Problem of Idleness.* In Second Thessalonians 3, the Apostle Paul urges the church, in very strong, authoritative language, to turn away from idleness in daily life and to avoid those in the church who are idle. It is clear he associates idleness with a sinful life and a testimony that displeases God. Second Thessalonians 3:6 commands, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us."

The Apostle uses his own life as a model for believers to follow. What is that life like? It is a life of labor. Second Thessalonians 3:7–12 states, "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat. We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat."

Why was Paul so concerned about working so hard? He explains that it was so they would not be a burden. The Apostle Paul expressed this concern to the same church in First Thessalonians. First Thessalonians 4:11–12 exhorts, "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."

Along with the concern about not being a burden to others, Paul also expresses another concern: winning the respect of outsiders. Who are these outsiders? Those outside a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The question then concerns our place of labor. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:14, the Christian is the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Are we keenly aware that outsiders are watching how we approach our jobs and work? Are we concerned to win their respect, not so that we might look good in their eyes, but so they might see something of God's image in us? Perhaps God will use your example to open an opportunity for you to share the Gospel of the Lord Jesus with someone.

This intentional idleness is considered a severe offense in Scripture. The Proverbs repeatedly raise this theme. There we find the infamous sluggard. The writer of Proverbs goes to great lengths to portray the sluggard or idle person as someone not to imitate or avoid. In many cases, his laziness is so extreme and exaggerated that it is meant to be humorous.

Proverbs 19:24 observes, "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth." Proverbs 22:13 records, "The sluggard says, There is a lion outside, or I will be murdered in the streets." Proverbs 26:13 similarly notes, "The sluggard says, There is a lion in the road! A lion is in the open square!" He makes excuses for not acting.

The idle man often suffers from neglect of his material and spiritual needs. Proverbs 19:15 warns, "Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless man goes hungry." Proverbs 20:13 counsels, "Do not love sleep, or you will grow poor; stay awake, and you will have food to spare." Proverbs 13:4 contrasts, "The sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied."

Finally, consider the excellent character of the Proverbs 31 wife. Proverbs 31:27 commends her: "She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness." Idleness for those who can work is inconsistent with holy Christian living.

*The Virtue of Industriousness.* In keeping with character traits associated with labor, the Bible contrasts the idle man, or sluggard, with the industrious person, who is marked by hard work, discipline, and perseverance. We will look at only two examples among many in the Word of God, both from the book of Proverbs.

The virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 is also known as the industrious woman. Her dedication, hard work, and perseverance are an example to women and men. As we consider this passage, notice her work ethic in particular. Proverbs 31:10–31 describes her: "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She selects wool

and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate."

Young single men would do well to study this passage to know what kind of woman to pray for as a mate. Notice that she fears the LORD. Again, we see the relationship between diligent hard work and a God-centered, honoring life.

The Proverbs also offer an example of industriousness using one of the tiniest of God's creatures. Proverbs 6:6–11 instructs, "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you wake up? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man."

What is the ant's labor ethic? Verse 7 shows that it works independently. Verse 8 demonstrates that it saves for the future and plans ahead.

*Proper Motivation for Labor.* The big question for us all, one that gets to the heart of our relationship with the Lord, is what motivates us to have the industrious, diligent work ethic that Scripture so clearly commends. We must limit ourselves to just two motivational principles from the Word of God: we work first and foremost for the glory of God, and we work for the opportunity to provide.

What is our motivation to labor if we are Christians? The honor and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps the classic passage in Scripture is Colossians 3. Colossians 3:22–24 instructs, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

We often hear that the Bible either endorses slavery or is neutral on the issue. Whatever may be true of that discussion, what is clear from the New Testament writers is that they are more concerned about the witness the slave presents to the ungodly world by living and working in reverence to the Lord. If that was true of those poor people in slavery, how much more should it be true of us?

This motivation and attitude draw non-Christians to investigate why we serve the Lord with such gladness. That is the ultimate motivation for each of us. Whether we have a well-paying dream job or a minimum-wage job, we work for the Lord. I am often refreshed when I go to a restaurant or store where I know the workers have a difficult job. Perhaps it does not pay well, but they seem to love their work and do it cheerfully. This is what God would have his people be like.

Beyond our motivation to work for the Lord, we also work for the opportunity to provide. This includes meeting our own needs and those of others. In the Genesis account of the creation ordinance of labor, Adam was to tend the Garden to enjoy its fruits. In other words, even in the sinless state, God would have him work the Garden to provide for his own needs and those of others.

We see this often throughout God's Word. The exhortation is to labor and work hard, not for selfish gain. It is to work so that we are not a burden to others and have enough to help others. Ephesians 4:28 commands, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer but must work, doing something useful with his own hands so that he may have something to share with those in need."

The Christian is clearly tasked with providing for his family's needs when providential circumstances require it. First Timothy 5:8 warns, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

To summarize the two key principles for godly Christian living and the labor the Lord would have us to do: work as unto the Lord, and work to provide for your own needs and those of others.

*Labor and Sabbath Rest.* We must briefly consider the relationship between labor and the Sabbath, as established in the creation ordinance. What is the relationship between labor and the Sabbath? In Mark 2:27, we learn, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In God's rich mercy, he gave us a day to rest simply because he had ordained six days of labor.

O. Palmer Robertson writes, "The solidarity of God's ordinance of labor with the creation order may be seen in its immediate connection with the Sabbath principle. Meaningful rest may be experienced by the creation only in the context of meaningful labor. One day's rest in seven clearly implies six days of labor. By God's own pattern of creation and by his blessing of the creation in accordance with this pattern, man's order for labor is established."

We thank God for the pattern He provided in the Creation account: six days of labor and one blessed day of rest from our regular labors to worship and serve the living and true God.

## Wealth and Labor

Scripture speaks of wealth and labor in many places. We will briefly mention two basic subjects: blessings and warnings.

*The Blessings of Riches.* What is abundantly clear in the Word of God is that God often blesses the industrious man or woman. Often, this means these blessings include wealth. This wealth itself is the blessing and gift of God. Israel was instructed about this in the law of God in Deuteronomy 8:18, which states, "But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today."

We see the great wealth of God-fearing men like Job, Abraham, David, Solomon, and many others. The point to stress is that wealth is not inconsistent with godliness. It is the blessing of God, generally the result of labor.

*Warnings Concerning Wealth.* Though wealth earned through labor is a great blessing, Scripture warns against using it in ways that harm the soul. Wealthy people are warned and held accountable. They are charged with caring for those in need, honoring the Lord with their blessings, and resisting the trap of materialism and greed. Work hard for the Lord and be content with what he gives.

First Timothy 6:6–10 instructs, "But godliness with contentment is a great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. If we have food and clothing, with that we will be content. People who want to get rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

## Conclusion

God has made us to labor and serve him. Let us do so with contentment, a desire to help those in need, and a desire to reflect something of the image of God before our fellow man. From the very beginning in the Garden of Eden, labor has been God's good gift, a noble calling that allows us to participate in God's creative and providential work in this world. Though the fall brought hardship to our work, the fundamental goodness and dignity of labor remain. As believers, we are called to work diligently, not for our own glory or gain, but for the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ and the benefit of those around us. May we embrace the creation ordinance of labor with joy, gratitude, and a commitment to excellence that reflects the character of the God we serve.